DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 383 727 TM 023 153

AUTHOR Jarchow, Elaine; And Others
TITLE External Evaluation of the Iowa Distance Education Alliance.
PUB DATE Apr 95
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Francisco, CA, April 18-22, 1995).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Computer Uses in Education; *Distance Education; Educational Change; Elementary Secondary Education; Federal Aid; Financial Support; *Networks; Nontraditional Education; Program Evaluation; Teacher Education; *Telecommunications; Telecourses
IDENTIFIERS *External Evaluation; Fiber Optics; Iowa; *Iowa Distance Education Alliance; Star Schools

ABSTRACT

The Iowa Distance Education Alliance (IDEA) is a partnership involving educational institutions across Iowa that have received funding from the Federal Star Schools Program to demonstrate the use of the Iowa Communication Network's (ICN) fiber optic technology for elementary and secondary education. First-year activities focused on teacher training and public relations efforts. The fiber optic network became operational in the second year and emphasis was then shifted to using the network to deliver programming for schools and teachers. This report summarizes the effort and findings of two annual external evaluations of the IDEA, evaluations that included a review of project records, activities, and accomplishments, supported by a fact-finding tour and a report of observed strengths and weaknesses. It was concluded that acceptance of the system as an integral part of elementary and secondary education will take time. Implementation of the IDEA project occurred at a slower pace than originally projected, and, unfortunately, the alliance was not recommended for further federal funding. Continued public relations efforts and efforts to promote the ICN among teachers are recommended. (SLD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Elaine Jarchow

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"

ED 383 727

External Evaluation of the Iowa Distance Education Alliance

A paper presented to the American Educational Research Association

San Francisco, CA

April, 1995

by

Jarchow, Elaine
Dean
College of Education
Texas Tech University
Box 41071
Lubbock, TX 79409-1071
Phone: 806-742-2377

Sweeney, Jan
Associate Director
Research Institute for Studies in Education
E005 Lagomarcino
Iowa State University
Ames, IA 50011
Phone: 515-294-3721

Zvacek, Susan
Associate Professor
Center for Learning Technology
Old Dominion University
200-A Administration Annex
Norfolk, VA 23529
Phone: 804-683-6106

Fortune, Jim
Professor
Division of Administrative and Educational Services
College of Education
E. Eggleston Hall
Virginia Tech
Blacksburg, VA 24061-0302
Phone: 703-231-9731

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

External Evaluation of the

Iowa Distance Education Alliance

Introduction

The Iowa Distance Education Alliance (IDEA) is a partnership involving educational institutions across Iowa that received funding from the Federal Star Schools Program to demonstrate the use of the Iowa Communication Network's (ICN) fiber optic technology for K-12 instruction. Iowa Public Television (IPTV), the Iowa Department of Education, the state's three public universities, fifteen community colleges, fifteen area education agencies (AEAs), and many local school districts participated in the project over a two-year period. The project focused on accomplishing six major goals:

1) coordinating use of the ICN,
2) informing Iowans about the ICN,
3) preparing teachers to use the ICN,
4) connecting schools to the ICN,
5) improving instruction in five content areas through use of the ICN, and
6) documenting the effectiveness of the ICN.

During the first year of the project, activities focused on teacher training and public relations efforts as the state prepared for the fiber optic network to become operational. The fiber optic network was "lit" during the second year of the project and the project's emphasis then shifted to using the network to deliver programming for K-12 students and teachers, although training and public relations efforts continued.

This report summarizes the effort and findings of the two annual external evaluations of the Iowa Distance Education Alliance (IDEA). This external evaluation was designed to provide feedback from an external perspective. The external evaluation both years included:

1. A review of project records, activities and accomplishments;
2. A review of the 1992-1993 final report and supporting documents;
3. A verification of the collection of data to be used in the internal evaluation of the project;
4. A summary of a three day fact-finding tour which included interviews with most of the primary stakeholders in the project;
5. A report of observed strengths and weaknesses; and
6. Recommendations for future management action.

The three external evaluators represented the areas of teacher education curriculum, distance education, and evaluation, and conducted the evaluations in Spring 1993 and 1994. As a team they brought multiple perspectives to their task and produced a series of multi-dimensional recommendations.

Purpose of the Evaluation

The Iowa Distance Education Alliance (IDEA) is composed of four components, all associated with the fiber-optic based Iowa Communications Network (ICN), the Iowa Department of Education, and the Iowa Public Television. These components are: Teacher Education Alliance (TEA), the Regional Partnerships (AEAs and community colleges), the Communication and Resources Clearinghouse, and the Star Schools Project Management. The external evaluations were directed toward the answering of the following four questions:

1. Has the necessary attention to organizational variables and other factors been made to assure effective operation of the project?;
2. Has sufficient progress been made toward addressing the six goals and the three areas of need? Have the project activities been completed in a successful manner?;
3. To what extent is there commitment to and institutionalization of the IDEA in Iowa education?; and
4. What is the status of the recommendations offered by the external review team?

Address of the External Evaluation Questions

Question 1: Has the necessary attention to organizational variables and other factors been made to assure effective operation of the project? When a complex organization is growing as rapidly as IDEA, it is difficult to monitor all dimensions of the total system. The points of presence grew from 48 to 103. The system became user friendly, and classes were being taught. The evaluators commended management on showing leadership in dealing with both users and potential users. Work with the high schools, the National Guard, members of the medical profession, and the regional coordinators was noted. A few problems surfaced and were addressed. These included: the schedule; the clearinghouse and at a point transfer; scattered technical difficulties; the mystery concerning some system effects; and legal ramifications of some aspects of system operation.

Difficulty with the equipment was overcome. Difficulty with the potential users growing up with the system appeared at the level that should be expected. Costs, legal problems, and

priority for system use presented difficulty greater than was expected. Project management was commended for progress.

The logistics of using the ICN and pulling all of the disparate components of this project together appeared to be well under control, considering that the fiber network system was "lit" for so short a time. There was also a continuing (and increasing) sense of cooperation as community colleges, K-12 school districts, universities, and others utilized the system for a variety of purposes.

Questions 2: Has sufficient progress been made toward addressing the six goals and the three areas of need? Have the project activities been completed in a successful manner? Generally, progress was made in all three areas of need and on all six project goals. For the most part this progress was at a commendable level. The following list highlights the range of progress that was made. The progress included:

- Third graders "talked" to their pen-pals;
- Talented and gifted students had access to new courses;
- Use of internet and databases was being explored;
- Educators involved in the project engaged in a high level of sharing;
- Iowa State University offered to preservice teachers a course in the Theory and Practice of Distance Education;
- The TEA completed the Resource Guidebook;
- The ICN symposia for teacher educators was gaining in popularity;
- The TEA sponsored eight projects for teacher educators to undertake ICN activities in their classrooms;

- The TEA used the ICN to provide seminars for new teachers;
- The TEA is creating a community of technology users;
- The Summer Institute and Workshops were successful;
- Eighteen action research studies have been funded;
- The review of the distance education literature has been published by AECT and NCREL;
- One AEA will offer language classes for elementary students and will involve ESL students as tutors;
- Courses in Russian and storytelling have been successful;
- An empirical based needs assessment has successfully guided the project; and
- The internal evaluation team developed a comprehensive data base and an array of useful evaluative reports.

Two areas appeared somewhat lagging despite the above array of progress. The research that was accomplished appeared to be broad-based but limited in scope. The project did not tackle the big questions, nor seek the national publications. A second area that needed more emphasis was the development and/or adaptation of user friendly products for future users of the ICN. Examples of such products would include: an annotated summary of the sources reported in the literature review, a compiled reference list of classroom games, or materials that stimulate discussion. The ICN seemed to be used primarily to expand lecture audiences. Great progress was made, but creative uses of the ICN that affirmed the status of the effort were needed.

Question 3: To what extent is there commitment to and institutionalization of the IDEA in Iowa education? The meetings that the external evaluators attended clearly indicated that Regional Coordinators, AEAs, colleges and universities, community colleges, and K-12 systems, to some

degree, institutionalized IDEA. This institutionalization and commitment to the project are remarkable in a project just two years old. This commitment was one to a within state project and not to a national project. Because the ICN is for within state consumption, there appeared to be only a little commitment to add to the knowledge base or to participate at a national level.

A surprising degree of enthusiasm for this project was detected from almost all of the participants. Although everyone agreed that there were problems to be worked out, the commitment from all levels to making the system work was one of the true strengths of the project.

Question 4: What is the status of the recommendations offered by the external review team?

After the first evaluation, the following recommendations were made:

- Develop a plan to include minorities in project activities. This plan may include: the appointment of a minority advisor to project management, the appointment of a minority advisor to the TEA to recruit minority teachers for program participation, and the inclusion of minorities in demonstrations, and minority teachers from other states in across state hookups.
- Include minorities in the planned Lindemeyer Distance Education videotape.
- Resolve inconsistencies in planned ICN usage.
- Utilize the Iowa Technology Commission's Report to the Governor in planning for affirmative action to recruit more minorities into technology.
- Publicize the positive outcomes with districts and urge that they be tried across districts.
- Utilize the international students on the College and University campuses to infuse multicultural/global perspectives in the project and in the curriculum.

- Establish a THINK TANK of creative individuals within and outside of education to explore creative, futuristic users of the ICN.
- Establish interaction with individuals and agencies which are indirectly related to the project's activities (such as content specialists).
- Clarify the role of Drake University and small colleges in the project.
- Focus more on the role of the elementary school.
- Resolve the inequities of pay for curriculum institute attendees.
- Determine the criteria for including exemplary materials in the Clearinghouse.
- Include interviews with teachers who attended institutes and workshops in the next external evaluation, using the ICN, if possible.
- Send the survey data conclusions to respondents for validation.
- Include more time with project management in the next external evaluation.
- Encourage more action research by practicing teachers in the next round of Funded Research Projects.
- Conduct a Delphi about the ICN to discover its potential.

The external evaluation team congratulated the project staff in covering approximately 80% of the recommendations.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, the Iowa Distance Education Alliance was not recommended for further Federal funding. The Executive Summary, published in December, 1994, notes,

"As with any innovation, acceptance of the system as an integral part of K-12 education will take time. Implementation of the IDEA project occurred at a slower pace than originally anticipated, and although much effort was expended in the area of public relations, efforts to keep Iowans informed and to help educators realize the potential of the ICN remain an area for emphasis. Use of the ICN will continue to evolve, and as evidenced by the IDEA evaluation findings, continued success may hinge on future developments in several key areas."